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AUTHOR Hinds, Michael deCourcy
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ABSTRACT

Noting that a majority of adults believe something is fundamentally wrong with America's current moral climate, this booklet presents a framework for discussing the issue of troubled youths. The booklet presents three approaches, or choices, for addressing the problem: greater parental focus on children's needs; social partnerships in responsibility for raising children; and provision of moral discipline by families and social institutions. The issue of seemingly untroubled youths also getting into trouble is raised along with these approaches. Each of these approaches is examined in detail, providing checklists of points in favor and opposing each one. The choices are then compared in a single summary of broad issues and according to their handling of a case study of teenage vandalism. This booklet was prepared in anticipation of a National Issues Forum; the nature and value of these forums is discussed, and a pre-forum ballot is included that surveys readers for their opinions on this issue. (JPB)

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NATIONAL ISSUES FORUMS

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Our Nation's Kids

Is Something Wrong?

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A note about this issue book

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Our Nation's Kids
Is Something Wrong?

By Michael deCourcy Hinds

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Most American children are in good shape. But 1 in 4 adolescents abuses drugs, lags in school, or gets in trouble with the law. And an enormous number of kids experiment with drugs and alcohol, cheat at school, and are rude to adults. What does it all mean, if anything? What should we do?

Choice 1 **Put Children Ahead of Self-Satisfaction** 6

Many kids are troubled because they have grown up in daycare programs and empty homes. Most mothers have outside jobs, most fathers are busy, and most noncustodial parents provide absolutely no support. It's time for a reality check. Parents must sacrifice career, lifestyle, and personal ambitions to raise their children – and, to make sure they do, society must provide appropriate rewards and punishments.

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Choice 2 **Share Responsibility for Children** 11

It's easy to blame parents, but more to the point to blame society for treating children like second-class citizens. Look at the crumbling playgrounds, failing schools, and uncaring communities where kids run wild for lack of after-school programs. We must take responsibility as a society for meeting children's basic needs, much as we take responsibility for older Americans by providing them with Social Security pensions and Medicare health insurance.

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Without rules, children are unruly. They get into trouble, one increasingly serious misbehavior at a time. The problem is not that mom is at work or the library's closed, as the other choices suggest. The problem is that parents are permissive and schools have been stripped of their moral authority, leaving a moral vacuum to be filled by a decadent pop culture. The discipline kids need has to start with parents, schools, and the entertainment media.

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Our Nation's Kids

Is Something Wrong?

Paul Fusco/Magnum

Too many kids today are disaffected and in danger of getting into serious trouble.

It was an adolescent scavenger hunt, 1997 style. With the lure of a $160 cash prize, student organizers gave several dozen classmates two hours to steal traffic signs and public telephones, kidnap a freshman high school student, and buy a $10 bag of marijuana – to name a few items on their two-page list.

This blitz of mischief and vandalism on the night before Easter had police sirens wailing all over the small town of North Babylon, New York. Police interrupted the social event in a parking lot and, to the surprise of these middle-class teenagers, arrested 16 of them.

"It was supposed to be a big kind of get-together," 16-year-old Chris Cavalcante told *The New York Times*. "Maybe we did some things we shouldn't have, but it got everybody together. It really wasn't that bad that we should have gotten arrested."

True, no capital crimes were committed. But the incident captures a central American concern: something's very wrong with the way we raise children when even these "untroubled" kids don't think twice before ransacking their hometown – and are surprised when held accountable. What's wrong? Are parents so caught up in their work and lifestyles that they are shortchanging the time it takes to raise kids? Are we, as a society, denying children the basic services and care they need? Or are kids learning the wrong moral lessons from permissive homes, schools, and popular culture?

Rethinking Youth Problems

Too many American children are falling through the cracks. To give a sense of the size of these cracks, the Children's Defense Fund, a children's advocacy organization, prepares an annual list called "Every Day in America." The youth list for 1996 gives this daily toll: 3 died from abuse or neglect; 6 committed suicide; 16 were killed with guns; 316 were arrested for violent crimes; 403 were arrested for drug offenses; 466 babies were born to mothers who received late or no prenatal healthcare; 1,420 babies were born to teenagers; 2,556 babies were born into poverty; 3,533 babies were born to unwed mothers; 3,356 dropped out of high school; 5,702 were arrested; 13,076 were suspended from school; and 100,000 remained homeless.

These dismal statistics may seem aberrational, given how much Americans profess to care about children. Most Americans say in national

surveys that helping kids get a good start in life should be the nation's top priority – even ahead of fighting crime. With so much concern for kids, why aren't we doing more for them?

Research suggests that our tolerance for the large numbers of troubled kids arises not from indifference, but from a feeling of helplessness. Many ask: how can we help children when solutions inevitably involve parents? Americans are reluctant to intrude in others' child rearing, which is considered a private family matter. Also, helping disadvantaged children often involves helping disadvantaged parents, and many Americans believe that the wrong kind of help leads to irresponsibility and dependence on public programs, perpetuating youth problems.

Although 3 out of 4 adolescents engage in little or no risky behavior, the remaining 1 in 4 adolescents are in significant trouble.

On another level, Americans are divided over whether children's and adolescents' behavioral problems are largely economic or moral in cause. Americans who subscribe to the moral explanation tend to reject solutions involving government programs, though some support public institutions such as public schools, if they reinforce moral values and practices; but those who believe in the economic explanation tend to see government programs as the backbone of community efforts to meet youth needs. These competing views often become barriers, stopping public debate before there is any agreement on ways to improve the lives of children.

To promote discussion, this issue book outlines the youth issue, focusing on different visions of what children need to thrive, and then sketches three approaches to the problem that reflect widely held views.

Good Kids Don't Make News

The news media reported on the theft-a-thon in North Babylon because it was something new. It's news when kids get deeper in trouble – in fact, an estimated 40 percent of youth coverage is of juvenile violence. Since healthy families and children are not considered newsworthy, the news media inevitably produces a carnival-mirror view of the American family. This issue book also dwells on youth problems, so it's worth pausing to put the media's reflection of the family in context.

An overwhelming majority of Americans say in national surveys that their own families are in good shape, and some play down today's concern about youth by noting that nearly every prior generation worried about its own "youth crisis."

And contrary to stereotypes, more American high school students hold jobs, do household chores, and feel responsible for their own futures than do their peers abroad, according to a 1996 survey of 27,000 teenagers in 44 countries by the Brain Waves Group. Three out of 4 American students also say they enjoy learning, hope to go to college, and worry "the most" about getting a good job.

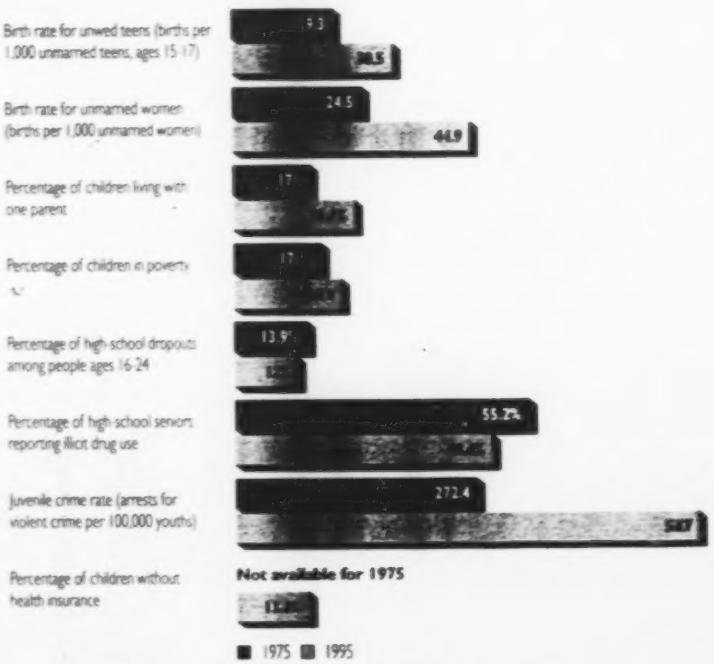
Putting the family in context lessens the gloom and doom that pervades discussion of youth problems, but it does not diminish the problems themselves. Although 3 out of 4 adolescents engage in little or no risky behavior, the remaining 1 in 4 adolescents are in significant trouble, ranging from drug abuse and teenage pregnancy to juvenile delinquency and more serious crimes, according to Joy G. Dryfoos's 1990 book, *Adolescents at Risk*. And even as most American parents say

Mark Harmel

Kids, without parental, community, or moral supports, may make the wrong decisions.

Kids: Troubled and in trouble

Eight indicators of children's well-being, 1975 and 1995


Birth rate for unwed teens (births per 1,000 unmarried teens, ages 15-17)
9.3
30.5
Birth rate for unmarried women (births per 1,000 unmarried women)
24.5
44.9
Percentage of children living with one parent
17
Percentage of children in poverty
17
Percentage of high school dropouts among people ages 16-24
13.9%
Percentage of high school seniors reporting illicit drug use
55.2%
Juvenile crime rate (arrests for violent crime per 100,000 youths)
272.4
587
Percentage of children without health insurance
Not available for 1975
1975
1995

Sources: National Center for Health Statistics; U.S. Census Bureau; National Center for Education Statistics; Bureau of Justice Statistics

Human Issues Collaborative

The news media draws our attention to troubled kids, but most kids are doing well.

their own children are doing well, most also tell pollsters that teenagers are wild, scary, disrespectful, unfriendly, and thoughtless. Teenagers themselves see widespread behavioral problems in their ranks, saying, for example, that there are too many disruptive students and too much cheating at school.

Something's wrong. Some Americans believe youth problems start developing in the earliest days of childhood.

Who Is Raising the Children?

"Your kids spend more waking hours with daycare than they do with you," Linda Friedman, a computer programmer and mother of a 2-year-old boy, lamented in an interview with *The Los Angeles Times*.

Some Americans say the main reason for today's youth problems is that parents don't spend enough time with their children, from infancy through adolescence. In two-parent families, the stay-at-home mother has become a rarity; more than half of all mothers return to their jobs before their babies are a year old, and nearly two-thirds of mothers with preschool children work outside the home at least part-time. Fathers still see their family role as financial provider, and relatively few are highly involved in their children's daily lives.

In single-parent families, which are nearly all headed by women, usually with outside jobs, the parent deficit is even greater, in this view. Not only is the working mother away from home, but the nation's 9 million noncustodial fathers tend to be absentee parents, with most failing to pay any child support or to make regular visits to their children. Today, nearly 1 in 3 children is born to an unwed mother, and nearly 1 in 2 children is expected to see his or her parents divorce.

These trends raise questions about the American way of raising children. Are parents really pressed to the wall by economic necessity? Or is it by personal ambition and the urge for self-satisfaction?

And, some retort, why isn't society doing its fair share for kids?

Mom, Apple Pie – and Community?

A grassroots movement centered on families is spreading across the country like a prairie wind. It's all about reviving community spirit, encouraging people to take more civic responsibility for family needs. Many Americans see these efforts as local barn-raising campaigns that bring citizens together to make their communities more nurturing for families and children. These citizen activists are not only volunteering their time and resources for family programs, they are also trying to make government more responsive and more effective in meeting children's needs. These public efforts range from expanding daycare programs to rebuilding playgrounds. In this context, community extends beyond local borders; for example, these Americans strongly support universal health insurance for children. Massachusetts took this step in 1996, extending healthcare coverage to all of its children by raising its tax on cigarettes by 25 cents a pack.

Community revivalists don't all agree on underlying principles, though. Some see community efforts as a *supplement* to government programs, while others see them as a *replacement* for those programs. Despite such fundamental disagreements, this grassroots movement continues to grow. At the 1997 Presidents' Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia, for example, civic-minded volunteers played down their differences as they pursued a common goal, to improve the lives of vulnerable children by, among other things, providing children with adult mentors before they get into trouble.

Other Americans, however, question whether the community, by any definition, can really address the moral decay they see at the core cause of today's youth problems.

Are Kids Getting Good Guidance?

Eight or 9 out of 10 Americans repeatedly tell pollsters something is fundamentally wrong with America's morals. This concern surfaced, for example, in 1997, when people read about widespread corruption in a Philadelphia police precinct and about nude dancers – simulating sadomasochistic activities – at a birthday party for a prominent San Francisco political operative, attended by top city officials. But many Americans also see the rise in youthful misbehavior as the result of a yawning lapse in moral judgment. In this view, the relaxed social mores of the 1960s have spawned a generation of indulgent parents, permissive schools, and a popular culture that fills the moral vacuum with immoral role models.

Students at Nathan Hale High School in Seattle raised some of these issues in essays published in *The Seattle Times* in 1996. Some excerpts:

- *We're all at fault:* "The problem with finding solutions is that all of us must start with ourselves before we can blame the poor morals of America on 'those other' people," wrote Janice Sorrell.
- *Parents and schools are to blame:* "Many important values are being overlooked because schools don't have a required course entitled 'Morality,' and parents don't care enough to sit down with their kids and have a nice chat on the topic," wrote Ting-Wei Chiang.
- *Popular culture promotes immorality:* "I am a member of an unprecedented generation raised, by and large, by television. What we see isn't always good for us to see," wrote Nate Cole-Daum.

Other students raised important questions: Are parents, teachers, and popular culture too permissive? Aren't democracies supposed to be permissive, ensuring personal freedom? If society is permissive, is that what's leading children into trouble?

A Framework for Discussion

As a framework for discussing the youth issue, this book presents three approaches, or choices, for addressing the problem:

Choice One says many kids are troubled because they have grown up in daycare programs and empty homes. Most mothers have outside jobs, most fathers are busy, and most noncustodial parents provide no support. Parents must spend much more time with their children, from infancy through adolescence. Parents must sacrifice personal ambitions and self-satisfaction to raise children – and, to make sure that they do, society must provide appropriate rewards and punishments.

Choice Two says it's easy to blame parents, but more to the point to blame society for treating children like second-class citizens. Look at the crumbling playgrounds, failing schools, and uncaring communities where kids run wild for lack of after-school programs. We must take responsibility as a society for meeting the basic needs of children, much as we do for older Americans by providing them with Social Security pensions and Medicare health insurance.

Choice Three says that without rules, children are unruly. They get into trouble, one increasingly serious misbehavior at a time. The problem is not that mom's at work or the library's closed, as the other choices suggest, but that parents are permissive and schools have lost their moral authority, leaving a moral vacuum to be filled by a decadent pop culture. The discipline kids need has to start with parents, schools, and the entertainment media.

For Further Reading / Our Nation's Kids

- Joy G. Dryfoos, *Adolescents at Risk: Prevalence and Prevention* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
- Elizabeth J. Erwin, ed., *Putting Children First: Visions for a Brighter Future for Young Children and Their Families* (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1996).
- Irwin Garfinkle, Jennifer L. Hochschild, Sara S. McLanahan, eds., *Social Policies for Children* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1996).

Put Children Ahead of Self-Satisfaction

Courtesy of Hogan Hilling

To be an at-home father, Hogan Hilling, shown here with his family, gave up his wallpapering business.

Like most working parents, Hogan and Tina Hilling of Irvine, California, worried about doing the right thing for their two boys – Grant, 2, and Wesley, 1. The parents juggled work schedules and got help from grandparents, but still worried. Complicating matters, Wesley was born with Angelman's Syndrome, a chromosomal deficiency that hindered his development. The Hillings ruled out daycare, because they wanted to raise their own children. "Quality daycare is expensive, but the quality of care a child gets at home is priceless," Hogan told Public Agenda in 1997.

What to do? After considerable soul-searching and budget-making, Hogan closed his wallpapering business in 1991 and became a full-time, at-home parent. Tina, a speech therapist, became the family's sole financial provider. To compensate for the decline in income, from about $96,000 to $46,000, the Hillings sold their new home and bought a smaller, older one. They also gave up costly vacations, first-run movies, eating out, name-brand clothes, and impulse shopping. The Hillings even borrowed $20,000 to buy time for their expanding family – their third child, Matthew, was born in 1993. "We concluded that the quality of our life as a family was more important than the quality of our lifestyle," Hogan said. "You can see the difference it makes with the kids, and I know it's made me a better person."

Kids Need Parental Care

As parents, the Hillings have their priorities in the right order, with child rearing on top of the list, according to Choice One. In this view, many kids today are in trouble primarily because parents are absent. Most mothers work outside

the home, most fathers are busy, and most noncustodial parents ignore their family responsibilities entirely. And now, after more than 20 years of families trying to get by on daycare and "quality time," the evidence is becoming clear: kids don't do well with parent substitutes. The implications for parents, especially women, are enormous, but they can't be dodged, in this view.

If we want to raise healthy kids, Choice One supporters say, one parent should stay home with children under the age of 2 or 3. Traditionally, women have stayed home with small children, but Choice One says men should share this responsibility. And, in this view, because it takes two involved parents to raise children, couples should stay together, if at all possible, long enough to accomplish the important work of raising their children. A divorce that ends a bad marriage may well be in the best interests of the children, but Choice One supporters say that far too many marriages fall apart because parents put their interests ahead of their children's.

Having a child involves an 18-year commitment from both parents. Ideally, one parent should stay home or work part-time through all the child-rearing years; but, at a minimum, parents should spend hours, not minutes, each day with their children and ensure that they have adult supervision in the parents' absence. Noncustodial parents, nearly all fathers, cannot be allowed to ignore their family responsibilities, in this view.

Wanted: Self-Sacrificing Parents

Today's parents spend an estimated 40 percent less time with their children than their own parents spent with them. Choice One sees this time gap, sometimes called the "parent deficit," as parental neglect, and cautions that it's becoming the social norm. Powerful economic and social forces, ranging from the global economy to the women's movement, have put enormous pressure on parents to put career and lifestyle ahead of child rearing, in this view. Well-intentioned parents try to do the impossible: raise families with hardly a pause in their dual-income pursuit of the American Dream of better jobs, bigger houses, and fancier cars. Many Americans, in this view, could step off this treadmill of consumption, scale back their lifestyles and work schedules, and give children what they need most – parental time.

What Can Be Done

Supporters of Choice One generally favor the following measures:

- If people have children, they must be prepared to sacrifice self-satisfaction and personal ambitions for their children's sake. One parent should stay home with infants and toddlers, and both parents should spend more time supervising older children.
- Encourage parental childcare by eliminating tax benefits for daycare programs and by providing tax credits to stay-at-home parents.
- To help parents spend more time with their children, government should:
  - Develop a national insurance program, similar to European models, to help replace income lost while a parent stays home with small children.
  - Restore tax benefits for families with children to their 1940s level.
  - Encourage marriage by reducing family tax payments by one percent for each year parents stay together while raising children.
  - Raise the federal minimum wage to a livable family wage of about $7.50 an hour.
- Repeal the 1996 welfare law provision that requires new mothers to find work – and put newborns in daycare – soon after giving birth.
- Extend tax credits to companies that offer work-at-home schedules and other programs that help parents spend more time with their children.
- Help noncustodial fathers reconnect with their children by expanding programs like one in Missouri, which helps fathers find jobs, pay child support, and re-enter their children's lives.
- Sharply increase enforcement of civil and criminal penalties for parents who refuse to pay child support.
- Expand family planning programs to reduce the number of people who have children before they are ready and expand educational programs that teach teenagers about parental responsibilities. Make parenting courses a prerequisite for obtaining marriage licenses.

Infants and toddlers need a parent at home. Someone other than a parent provides daycare for nearly half of America's infants and toddlers, and that, in this view, is a major problem for children and society. Studies repeatedly warn that most daycare arrangements, even when care is given by relatives or in family settings, fail to meet the developmental needs of most children. For example, researchers at Yale and three other universities surveyed 400 daycare centers in four states and reported in 1995 that only 1 in 7 centers offered the kind of warm relationships that teach children to trust adults and the intellectual stimulation that helps prepare children for school.

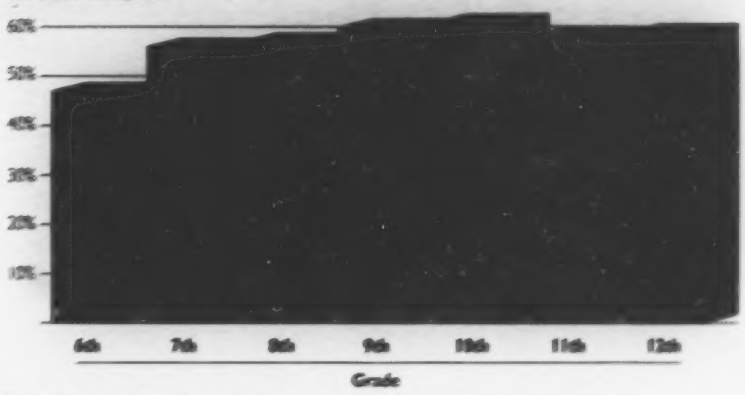
Researchers have long observed that infants and toddlers need to form secure, stable attachments with a nurturing caregiver. When small children don't spend much time with a parent, or spend time with a multitude of caregivers, the

Courtesy of Dads Make a Difference

Teens teach younger kids about the responsibilities of parenthood, as part of an innovative program called Dads Make a Difference.

Too Many Kids Are Home Alone

Percentage of 6th through 12th graders who spend two or more hours each day at home without an adult, 1990



Source: "The Troubled Journey," Search Institute

children face a much higher risk for everything from substance abuse to learning disabilities, studies indicate. Recent brain research helps explain why early childcare is so important: the human brain develops with astonishing rapidity in the first few years of life, creating trillions of neural pathways that form a mental map for all subsequent learning and behavior. During this extremely important period, inadequacies in childcare, sensory stimulation, and nutrition can lead to lifelong learning, emotional, and behavioral problems, scientists say.

Older children need lots of parental care and supervision. Studies indicate that most juvenile crime and sexual activity occurs during the afternoon and early evening hours when parents are absent. Many children, some only 9 or 10, return from school to empty homes. And many parents are almost too busy to be parents: 1 in 5 children in grades 6 through 12 told researchers from the Search Institute in 1993 that they had not had a good conversation lasting more than 10 minutes with either parent in more than a month.

Commenting on this parent deficit, childcare authority Penelope Leach writes: "However much they may delegate to other caregivers and to educational institutions, parents and parent figures are crucial to every phase of this long human childhood."

Most Juvenile Offenders Don't Come from Two-Parent Homes

Percentage of youth in state juvenile institutions who did not live with both parents while growing up, 1987

Source: "Survey of Youth in Custody," Bureau of Justice Statistics

Society Has to Lead the Way

Given the social importance of parents spending more time with their children, Choice One calls for government, businesses, and communities to help. In today's economy, for example, staying home isn't financially feasible for many parents, especially single parents and those with low incomes. Government should help in many ways, including raising the minimum wage to a livable family wage. Many cities, the largest being Los Angeles, passed laws in 1997 that move in this direction. Under L.A.'s law, companies that do business with the city must pay employees a living wage, which the city set at $7.25 an hour, plus family health benefits, or enough to keep a family of four out of poverty.

The federal government should also restore family tax benefits, which have been eroded by inflation. For example, if the deductions for children had maintained their 1948 value, a family of four with a median income of $47,915 would have paid $10,060 less in taxes in 1992, according to the Heritage Foundation, a nonprofit public policy research organization.

Government should also repeal portions of the new welfare law that require single mothers to find a job within as little as 12 weeks after giving birth. Can the nation afford to take these measures? It can't afford not to, in this view.

Employers also have a responsibility to help parents balance the demands of work and family. Take Patagonia, an outdoor clothing manufacturer in Ventura, California: the company permits its 550 employees to work flexible schedules, so parents can set their own hours, work part-time, or work at home with company equipment. Patagonia had expected to lose money on the program, but wound up saving $229,000 a year, thanks largely to reduced employee turnover and associated training costs.

Two Involved Parents for Every Child

Choice One supporters say it takes two involved parents to raise a child. For one parent to stay home with children, another parent has to provide financial support. And supervising older children is clearly a two-parent job, in this view. The origin of many youth problems, then, can be found in the following family trends:

■ *More single parents.* Between 1960 and 1990, the divorce rate more than doubled and the number of children born out of wedlock increased fivefold. In 1990, 2 out of 3 black births occurred out of wedlock, as did 1 out of 5 white births.

■ *More absentee fathers.* Only 1 in 6 children of divorced parents sees his or her noncustodial father more than once a week, and many kids don't see divorced fathers from year to year, the National Commission on Children reported in 1991. Most noncustodial fathers do not pay any child support.

■ *Less help from fathers.* Research suggests that the father who is highly involved with his children's care is an anomaly. Most fathers in intact families are, as one expert put it, "technically present but functionally absent," spending less than a half-hour a day with their children and even less time on family chores.

Efforts to reverse these trends should be part of any effort to turn around the youth problem, in this view. For starters, Choice One calls for expanding sex education and family planning programs, to reduce the number of births to parents who are unprepared to handle this important commitment.

In addition, noncustodial parents must be held accountable for supporting their children. Under the banner of responsible fatherhood, thousands of community programs around the country have begun helping fathers reconnect, financially and emotionally, with their children. Some programs provide social services, others provide family activities, and some prevention programs reach into the schools. One school program in Minnesota, called Dads Make a Difference, uses teenage teachers to tell middle-school children the facts of life, including some of the legal, financial, and emotional responsibilities of fatherhood. "I got pregnant the first time I had sex," a teenage mother says in one of the program's videotapes about family planning and parental responsibility. "I don't think guys think they get pregnant, but it's their baby, too," concludes the teen mother, who is trying to raise a child alone. Choice One supporters call for expanding enforcement of child-support laws and increasing the penalties for deadbeat parents who refuse to support their children.

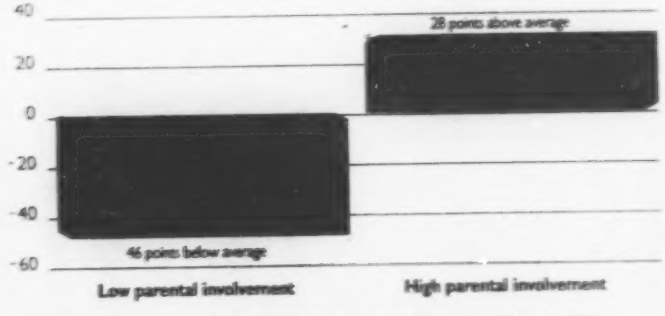
From *Time* / © 1992 Los Angeles Daily News

Mike Mesko works for Patagonia, a California clothing manufacturer that provides flexible work schedules for parents.

Parental Involvement Helps Children Learn

Reading comprehension level of 4th graders whose parents are involved and those whose parents are not involved (zero is average reading level), 1994

Note: Parental involvement includes reinforcing at home what is learned at school and participating in children's school-related activities.



Source: "Reading Literacy in the United States Technical Report," U.S. Department of Education, 1994

In Support

✓ To provide the loving care that infants and toddlers need to thrive, there is no substitute for a parent at home.

✓ Studies repeatedly report that babies who form a secure emotional attachment with one parent develop far fewer behavioral and emotional problems than babies who receive care from many different people.

✓ Studies have also found a phenomenally high turnover rate for caregivers in daycare centers, primarily because of low pay. Consistent, high-quality daycare is the exception, not the rule, in America.

✓ Every child needs two involved parents, because one alone cannot provide the child with adequate support and supervision.

✓ Recent brain research has confirmed the critical importance of optimal early childcare. Scientists say the quality of early care is a major factor in whether or not children thrive.

✓ Too many parents work outside the home so they can buy consumer goods for their children and themselves, when what children really need is more parental time and attetion.

✓ One effective way to prevent parental irresponsibility is to provide educational programs that encourage couples to plan their families, in whatever way fits their values.

✓ Many new programs have been successful in reconnecting noncustodial fathers with their children – emotionally as well as financially.

✓ Studies indicate that businesses have more loyal employees and less staff turnover when they help employees to be better parents.

In Opposition

✗ This approach is totally unrealistic in calling for a parent to stay home with small children. Most married couples are not working two jobs to buy espresso machines or designer sneakers, as this choice implies. They are struggling to provide a home in a safe neighborhood, save for college tuition, or pay for health insurance.

✗ Despite the egalitarian language in this choice, its effect would be to undermine women's progress toward equality.

✗ Research on daycare is clear: children do well in good programs.

✗ This choice romanticizes the idea of parents staying home with kids, but the mere presence of a parent at home is no guarantee of successful child rearing.

✗ In seeking to revise the 1996 welfare reform law, this choice would again have government encouraging unwed mothers to have children and go on public assistance.

✗ The "livable family wage" this choice calls for would nearly double the current minimum wage – and force many businesses to lay off workers. Nor can the nation afford the tax reductions proposed here.

✗ This choice says children would thrive with more parental attention. But the youth problem isn't a matter of time, it's a matter of morals. Many parents fail to teach children the difference between right and wrong.

✗ Parents are not to blame: most parents can't raise healthy children without more community and public support for children's services, including after-school programs and healthcare.

For Further Reading/
Put Children Ahead of Self-Satisfaction

- Carnegie Task Force on Meeting the Needs of Young Children, *Starting Points: Meeting the Needs of Our Youngest Children* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1994).
- Isabelle Fox, with Norman K. Lobsenz, *Being There: The Benefits of a Stay-at-Home Parent* (Hauppauge, N.Y.: Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 1996).
- David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (New York: Martin Kessler Books/The Free Press, 1996).

Share Responsibility for Children

Richard Sennett

As part of Children First, a comprehensive citywide effort in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, everyone is expected to help kids, including kids themselves. Here, Namibia Little tutors Mohammed Mahazu.

A few years ago, St. Louis Park was 10 square miles of suburban sprawl west of Minneapolis. Neighborhoods had no names, the municipality of 45,000 had no town center, and when families prospered they tended to move out of this ethnically diverse, largely blue-collar area.

Today, St. Louis Park is a community. Residents have formed associations and given their neighborhoods names like Minikahda Vista and Texa Tonka. A 125-acre town center is being built, complete with a village green and a $9 million recreation center with swimming pools and ice skating rinks. And there has been a rush on building permits as families remodel rather than relocate, even though local taxes have risen by 8 percent to help pay for civic improvements.

But that's not all. With city assistance, neighborhoods are opening "safe" houses for children, should they get lost or frightened. Daycare centers and after-school programs have opened or expanded. Teenagers are mentoring younger children in a school district where kids speak 50 languages, including Russian and Vietnamese. Voters, by a 2-to-1 margin, passed a ballot measure to spend $17 million renovating the district's six schools – which, by the way, have all won national honors for excellence. Under discussion are other improvements including a "one-stop-shop" for family social services, an art center, a library, and a public transit system of minivans, specifically intended for children and older citizens.

All this didn't happen overnight, but there were two major catalysts: first, residents adopted a civic philosophy in 1994 that they call Children First; it calls on all citizens to do anything, large or small, that helps make St. Louis Park a more nurturing home for families and children. And, in 1995, a new state program called Livable Communities gave the city a planning grant to make St. Louis Park into a place where children are "a top priority for the entire community."

"This community has a vision, and it's a vision bought into by virtually the whole community," says Gail A. Dorfman, St. Louis Park's part-time mayor and the mother of three schoolchildren.

Give Children Their Due

Choice Two supporters believe that parents can give their children a good start in life, but that's about it. No matter how loving and conscientious parents are at home, their children will do

What Can Be Done

Supporters of Choice Two generally favor the following measures:

- Make a commitment as a society to meet children's basic needs – much as we are committed to helping older Americans with Social Security pensions and Medicare health benefits.
- Provide all children with high-quality healthcare and daycare – and pay for these programs with excise taxes and fees based on a family's ability to pay.
- To reduce the number of children suffering from the effects of poverty, government should:
  - Increase public-assistance grants for children.
  - Expand nutrition and housing programs.
  - Hire jobless parents for public works projects.
  - Lift more single-parent families out of poverty by expanding the law that requires companies to pay women and men the same wages for the same job so that companies must also pay men and women equally for doing comparable work with different job titles.
- Make federal and state grants to communities contingent on their improving children's services, including rebuilding schools, staffing children's libraries, and expanding after-school and summer youth programs.
- Keep schools open year-round as community centers to provide educational, recreational, and social services for families and children.
- National and community leaders should remind all adults that they have a civic responsibility to share their time and money with children – by doing such things as volunteering in after-school programs and supporting tax increases to improve schools and recreation centers.
- To help children develop a sense of community responsibility, make community service a requirement for high school graduation.

much of their growing up in places like school hallways, church basements, playgrounds, mall parking lots, and libraries. Research confirms common sense: the quality of this experience in the community greatly influences the way children develop. In effect, the community shares the parenting role, and it's not just for altruistic reasons. For the sake of its own vitality, society must care for children, because it benefits when they become well-adjusted, productive adults.

Just as government provides healthcare, nursing care, and pensions for the elderly, government should meet the basic needs of the young.

Americans profess to care about children, but treat them like second-class citizens. One tell-tale statistic: in 1995, federal government spending on programs for children was one-fifth of spending on programs for people 65 and over. It's time, in this view, for our society to make a commitment to meet children's basic needs, much as we are committed to providing older Americans with Social Security pensions and Medicare health coverage. Choice Two supporters say that if we're really serious about improving the lives of children, we must take actions – improve their lives by making their surroundings safer and giving them high-quality education, healthcare, daycare, and financial stability. We should rebuild their playgrounds, staff their libraries, fill their idle hours with museum trips and swimming meets, and invite them into the adult world with apprenticeship programs and community service projects. Children are not just the parents' responsibility, but everyone's responsibility, in this view.

Oregon: Kids Need the Basics

To thrive, children must have the most basic kinds of care – and this is where government must lead, according to Choice Two. Consider some statistics, all reflecting national patterns, that prompted Oregon officials to streamline and expand programs for families and children:

- *Inadequate healthcare.* In 1990, 21 percent of the state's children had no health insurance.
- *Inadequate daycare.* In 1993, only 36 percent of the state's childcare providers were meeting basic safety standards.
- *Inadequate financial support.* One in 7 white children lived in poverty in 1990, as did 1 in 5 Asian children and 1 in 3 black, Hispanic, and Native American children.

In 1991, public officials in Oregon made a major commitment to improve the lives of children in the state. First, legislators created a plan to provide children and families with comprehensive prevention and remedial services. The program includes dozens of goals and a system for measuring progress. Goals for 2000 include: immunizing 90 percent of 2-year-old children; making high-quality daycare affordable to 70 percent of families; and reducing the overall poverty rate to 11 percent, in part through expanded training programs that enhance job skills of the unemployed and minimum-wage workers.

Oregon should be a model of what other states and the federal government should do, in this view. Choice Two supporters say the federal government should also make national commitments to meet children's basic needs in education, healthcare, daycare, and financial stability. The federal government should make these universal benefits for families, and

pay for them by raising taxes and charging families fees based on their ability to pay. In this view, the federal government is the only entity that can ensure that all American children have an equal chance to thrive.

St. Louis Park as a Community Model

Government alone cannot solve youth problems, however. Choice Two calls on all Americans to help make their communities more responsive to the needs of children and families. It requires leadership and changes in spending priorities, as the people of St. Louis Park have demonstrated.

Carl A. Holmstrom, the town's superintendent of schools, started it all with a speech that sounded like many made by educators in 1992. He told a group of Rotarians why so many local children were failing to thrive: the family has deteriorated and schools can't pick up the slack by themselves. "I used the old African proverb, 'It takes a village to raise a child,'" he recalled, and was surprised by the eagerness of his audience to help.

Looking for answers, he consulted the Search Institute, a nonprofit research organization in Minneapolis. Based on surveys of more than 250,000 students across the country, the institute had identified 30 developmental assets that help children thrive. Assets include positive indicators such as parental involvement in school activities, having an adult mentor, and a child's involvement in community or religious organizations. The fewer developmental assets a child has, the more likely the child will get in trouble, research suggests. Unfortunately, the average American child reports having only half of these developmental assets. It was no different in St. Louis Park, the institute discovered after doing a survey there.

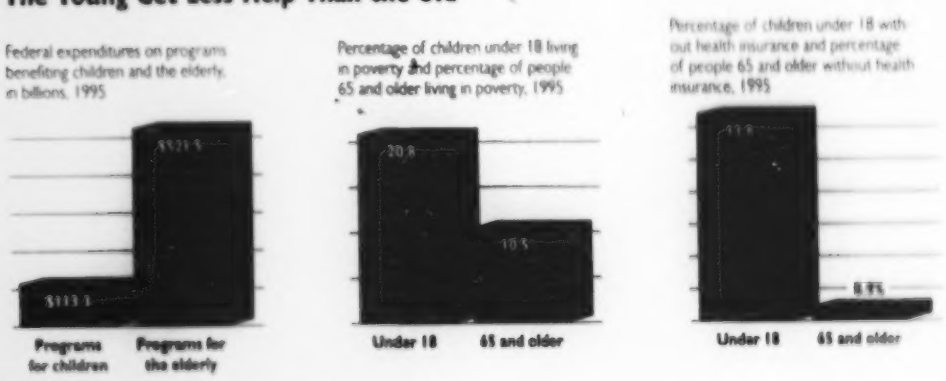
Susan Hern/NYT Pictures

Intermediate School 218 in New York City provides kids with a range of services outside the classroom, including dental care.

Committees were formed, town meetings held. Schools, businesses, and religious organizations became involved, and soon, everyone in St. Louis Park had been asked, in one forum or another, to do something to nurture children. Thousands responded. Just a few examples of how the community is filling in the developmental assets children lack:

- *Support from caring adults.* Volunteers have adopted 125 school bus stops, where they befriend children, console those with family or school problems, and mediate conflicts.
- *Involvement in community service.* Teenagers provide a free babysitting service at a local church.
- *Meeting children's basic needs.* A health insurance company opened a free children's health clinic with an all-volunteer staff.

The Young Get Less Help Than the Old


Federal expenditures on programs benefiting children and the elderly, in billions, 1995
$113.1
Programs for children
Programs for the elderly
Percentage of children under 18 living in poverty and percentage of people 65 and older living in poverty, 1995
20.8
10.5
Under 18
65 and older
Percentage of children under 18 without health insurance and percentage of people 65 and older without health insurance, 1995
Under 18
65 and older

Sources: Congressional Budget Office; U.S. Census Bureau

At right: The annual Ice Cream Social for kids and their families, in a public park in St. Louis Park, features free ice cream donated by a local merchant, horse-drawn carriage rides, and a visit from the county Readmobile.

Schools Should Be Community Centers

When citizens consider ways to revive community spirit and serve families better, thoughts naturally turn to the schools. Every community has them, children spend much of their lives in them, and in many communities, schools have become the meeting place, the town plaza, for families and residents. Schools are also the most underused community resource, as the school schedule itself suggests: most are open just half a year, only about seven hours a day. Choice Two supporters say that, as a first step to serving children better, communities should consider converting schools into full-service community centers. One of the nation's models is Intermediate School 218 in the Washington Heights section of New York City.

For 15 hours a day, six days a week, 52 weeks a year, I.S. 218's doors are open to students, their parents, and neighborhood children for dental and medical services, mental health counseling, early morning programs, daycare, recreation, three meals a day, sports and fitness programs.

City of St. Louis Park

day camping programs, visual and performing arts, drug and pregnancy prevention programs, adult education, and parenting skills courses.

"In our school you have everything you need outside your house," eighth grader Carmelin Diaz told *The New York Times* in 1993, the year after the school opened. It's also the kind of school where police officers come to learn Spanish from the students, who are mostly first-generation immigrants from the Dominican Republic.

The core curriculum at I.S. 218 is also unusual, organizing all courses around three themes: community service, business enterprise, and science. The results have been gratifying to supporters of this approach: test scores in reading and math increase each year; attendance for both students and teachers is the highest in the district; and the school is free of violence, graffiti, and vandalism.

The cost? The comprehensive program ends up costing about $1,000 more per student than the $7,000 per-pupil district average. "For us, it's a bargain," says Philip Coltoff, director of the Children's Aid Society, a private charity that picks up the extra cost, a total of $1.25 million a year. He says education in America is seen as the route children can take to a better life, but few children can make that trip if they are hungry, have a toothache, or have to cope with problems at home. "We view schools as a cure-all for our social problems, but don't equip them to deal with the social ills they face daily," Coltoff says.

Key Ingredients for Well-Being: Many kids fall short

Ten developmental assets identified as critical to children's well being

Note: Based on its survey of 250,000 children, the Search Institute identified a total of 30 developmental assets kids need to thrive.

Developmental Asset, Definition
Percentage of 6th-12th grade youth who report having each asset
Family support: Family life provides high levels of love and support. 57%
Other adult resources: Youth has access to non-parent adults for advice and support. 49%
Positive school climate: School provides a caring, encouraging environment. 30%
Involved in school extracurricular activities: Youth spends one hour or more per week in school organizations or clubs. 61%
Involved in community organizations or activities: Youth spends one hour or more per week in organizations or clubs outside of school. 41%
Positive peer influence: Youth's best friends model responsible behavior. 31%
Self-esteem: Youth has high self-esteem. 47%
Values helping people: Youth places high personal value on helping other people. 52%
Cares about people's feelings: Youth cares about other people's feelings. 86%
Positive view of personal future: Youth is optimistic about his or her personal future. 69%

Source: The Search Institute

In Support

✓ America treats children like second-class citizens. They are the nation's most underserved population, and the evidence is everywhere: children without health insurance, the decline of public education, and, most obviously, the large number of troubled kids.

✓ Young Americans are as deserving as older Americans, and they deserve the same collective social commitment to meet their needs. Just as government provides healthcare and nursing care for the elderly, government should provide healthcare and daycare for the young.

✓ Society's obligation to help raise children is in its own interest: society benefits when children become productive adults, and suffers when they don't.

✓ Preventive programs for youth are costly, but are always less expensive, in lives and dollars, than dealing with problems as they arise.

✓ Idle minds are the devil's workshop. Research suggests that children who participate in engaging, educational after-school programs generally succeed in school. And success in school is closely linked to staying out of all kinds of trouble.

✓ Poverty increases the risks for every youthful problem, so antipoverty strategies must be part of any solution. Requiring companies pay women as much as men for similar work, for example, would reduce the number of women in poverty by 40 percent, according to research at Eastern Michigan University.

In Opposition

✗ This choice, in calling for an array of social services and tax breaks for families, would be prohibitively expensive, forcing huge reductions in other public programs or large tax increases.

✗ Government already provides a staggering array of social services, but many parents don't take advantage of them. Poor children, for example, can receive free healthcare under the Medicaid program, but irresponsible parents have failed to sign up millions of eligible children. Similarly, many parents don't take advantage of the nation's numerous youth programs.

✗ This choice calls for expanding public assistance programs just as Americans are trying to reduce them. The best way to help disadvantaged children is by breaking the cycle of welfare dependence.

✗ This choice would expand the community's role in raising children, but what children need most is more time with their parents. There is no substitute for parental care and attention.

✗ People are free to bring children into the world, but that right comes with an implicit obligation to raise them without expecting public assistance.

✗ When children misbehave, that's a moral problem requiring a moral solution. All the playgrounds and healthcare insurance in the world don't matter if parents and schools don't teach children the difference between right and wrong.

For Further Reading / Share Responsibility for Children

- Peter L. Benson, *All Kids Are Our Kids: What Communities Must Do to Raise Caring and Responsible Children and Adolescents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
- Amitai Etzioni, *The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1996).
- Penelope Leach, *Children First: What Our Society Must Do – And Is Not Doing – For Our Children Today* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

Give Children Moral Discipline

Cynthia Shaffer, Praise Pictures

Parents need to talk with their kids about difficult topics such as sex and drugs, so children don't pick up the wrong messages from popular culture.

Steven and Lynda Cottrell worried about their children living in a small California city where gangs formed in middle school and younger children aped the vulgar moves and lyrics of music videos they saw on MTV. In 1996 they decided to pack up their kids, Cody, 13, and Lindsey, 11, and move across the country to a sleepy town west of Charlottesville, Virginia.

Comparing the two communities, Cody says: "In California, there was a lot more of the drug culture and MTV was a real problem, with everything, sex and drugs and violence and disrespect for people as though it were nothing. In Virginia, it's different. The kids aren't into the drug songs and there's not as much interest in rap songs that show disrespect for people. The stores here don't carry the worst of it, and the schools don't let it in."

But families can't escape the permissive culture so easily. Lynda Cottrell, a full-time homemaker, says it's difficult to raise children with firm rules for behavior when so many other parents don't. And Steven Cottrell, an auto company executive, says he is happy with the move, but adds: "To a certain degree, we've traded one set of issues for another set," including new peer pressures his children face regarding sex and alcohol.

Choice Three supporters are sympathetic. In this view, too many parents and schools are permissive with children, leaving them in the influence of that moral vacuum called pop culture.

Needed: A Moral Renewal

Calling for more parental supervision or more children's services, as advocated by prior choices, does not even come close to addressing the basic problems that threaten children today, in this view. Choice Three supporters see youth problems as moral issues and call for a moral renewal in response. We're in a period of moral decline, they argue, and it will continue until we as a society put on the brakes. America's moral decline can be traced to the 1960s, when the youthful rebellion against autocratic institutions weakened all moral authority and, in particular, set parents and teachers adrift.

Uncertain of their roles, many parents allow children to grow up without clear rules or consequences for misbehavior. The Horatio Alger Association released a study in 1996 reporting that 1 in 4 families have no rules about drinking alcohol, smoking, doing homework, or household chores – and even more families have no rules about curfews, dating, clothes, or religion.

Studies also indicate that, without restraint, many children slide into trouble slowly, one misbehavior at a time.

Schools once stressed the basic virtues that bind society together. Now they're under pressure to stress self-esteem, and tolerate cheating, rudeness, and laziness. Exemplifying this change, one teacher told *U.S. News & World Report:* "We don't use the word *stealing* around here. We call it *uncooperative behavior*."

As if that wasn't enough, even the federal courts have put children in jeopardy over the last few decades. The courts have essentially deregulated the entertainment industry by expanding constitutional protection for the expression of ideas to include almost any expression, no matter how indecent. Most recently, in June 1997, the Supreme Court undermined an effort to protect children in cyberspace by striking down a federal law that prohibited making indecent material available to minors on the Internet.

So, when children turn to popular culture to find and try on adolescent and adult roles, they become immersed in a world where sex, violence, and instant gratification are the rule and consequences are the exception.

Kids Need Authoritative Parents

Without rules, children become unruly. And parents who hold back on discipline because they want "happy" children are only setting their children up for failure, in this view. "Establishing a family policy toward drugs won't do much good unless your children already know how to obey rules," says Children Now, an advocacy organization for children, in its booklet *Talking With Kids About Tough Issues.* As this example suggests, the purpose of rules for moral behavior is to steer children toward the fullest and happiest life possible.

In this view, many kids are getting in trouble because parents fail to teach them the difference between right and wrong. Today's parents are often indulgent and hesitate to assert their authority or hold children responsible for their actions – with the result that their children tend to be selfish, disrespectful, and troubled.

"Research suggests the best approach to parenting is to start out relatively strict and then loosen the reins a bit as the child gets older. What a lot of baby boomers have done is exactly the opposite," says Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg, who in 1994 completed a 10-year study of more than 20,000 adolescents and parents. Compared with their peers from

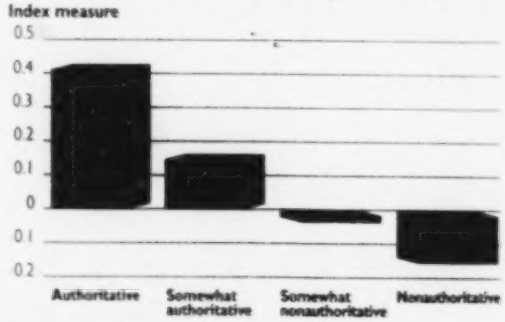
What Can Be Done

Supporters of Choice Three generally favor the following measures:

- Spread the word to parents, through every appropriate organization and program, that they are setting their children up for failure by not incorporating moral lessons into daily life. Children who disobey need discipline – without it, they become disciplinary problems.
- School boards and communities should permit principals and teachers to reassert their moral authority: They must be allowed to expel unruly students from class, suspend students who cheat, and when appropriate, use corporal punishment.
- Reintroduce instruction in basic virtues like responsibility and honesty into school culture and curriculum.
- Teach schoolchildren moral behavior that strengthens society; for example, instill the moral absolute that it's wrong to have sex outside of marriage or a baby out of wedlock.
- Teach children media literacy so they understand how they are being exploited and misled.
- Support retailers like Wal-Mart that have family standards for products like movies and compact discs.
- Oppose unhealthy programming and advertising directed at children by holding media officials up to public scorn and by boycotting advertisers' products.
- Require broadcasters to set aside an hour a day for family programming.
- Ban violence and sex from children's programs.
- Make the voluntary rating system that provides parents with the information they need about program content mandatory for all broadcasters.
- Give parents control over what comes into their homes with technology like the Violence Chip (V-Chip), which allows parents to restrict TV viewing. Provide similar parental controls for the Internet.
- Reform public policy – and laws, where possible – to reflect the moral values that help society function and help children thrive. For example, do not increase welfare benefits for people who continue having children out of wedlock.

Good Parenting Breeds Success: Kids thrive on warm, but firm, authority

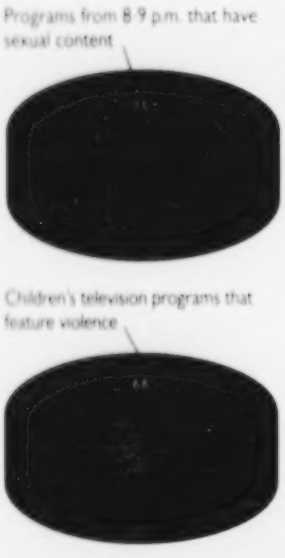
School performance of adolescents with parents of different levels of authoritativeness (zero is average level of performance), 1988



Source: "Impact of Parenting Practices on Adolescent Achievement," *Child Development*, October 1992

Bombarding Kids With Sex and Violence

Percentage of shows from 8-9 p.m. that have sexual content, and percentage of children's programming featuring violence, 1996



Sources: "Sex, Kids and the Family Hour," Children Now and the Kaiser Foundation; "National Television Violence Study," Mediascope

indulgent or autocratic homes, children raised by authoritative parents do better in school and are less likely to cheat, be anxious or depressed, get into trouble, or use drugs or alcohol.

How does an authoritative parent teach moral lessons? Steinberg explains by example: A toddler picks up an apple in a grocery store and starts to eat it. An *indulgent* parent says nothing and pays for the fruit. An *autocratic* parent punishes the child without explanation. An *authoritative* parent takes away the apple, telling the child in a warm way that it's against the rules, that it's wrong to eat a store's food before paying for it.

By age 18, the average adolescent has witnessed 200,000 acts of TV violence, nearly all of it presented as a normal response to conflict.

Teach Moral Lessons

"To educate a person in mind and not in morals is a menace to society," Theodore Roosevelt once said. Indeed, virtually every school in America used to teach some version of the "Children's Moral Code," a school-wide program that emphasized basic virtues such as personal responsibility, self-control, and self-reliance. Formal character education fell out of fashion and was replaced in the 1960s with a "values clarification" curriculum. In vogue through the 1970s, this approach taught children that all values are personal, and that no one has the right to impose his or her sense of right and wrong on others. This moral relativism, with nothing clearly right or wrong, set the stage for today's youth problems, according to Choice Three.

In this view, schools must be permitted to reassert their moral authority and teach children the values that will enable them to lead fulfilling and productive lives and will permit society to function smoothly. Students need to learn compassion and consideration for others. Thus, for example, teachers should be permitted to expel disruptive students from the classroom, suspend children who cheat, and, when appropriate, use corporal punishment.

Choice Three strongly supports the growing educational movement to reintroduce basic virtues, not just into the curriculum, but into the school culture. This means transforming the school into a community of virtue, where honesty, caring, fairness, respect, responsibility, hard work, and self-control are modeled, studied, expected, and celebrated everywhere from the classrooms to the playing fields. In sports, particularly, the emphasis should be on sportsmanship and teamwork, and not so much on winning and glorifying star players. In one Maryland school, where correcting bad behavior was formally reintroduced into the school culture, a student was recently caught cheating. There were consequences: he had to organize a schoolwide symposium on how cheating harms everyone. These moral efforts are having a measurable effect. In one study of 200 schools that embrace character education, for example, 77 percent reported fewer disciplinary problems, 68 percent had less absenteeism, and 64 percent saw less vandalism.

Laura Patrick Pictures

The classroom should be a place where children learn right from wrong, along with reading and math.

But most schools still don't go far enough with character education, say Choice Three supporters. Schools should also teach widely accepted core ethical values. High on the list of moral principles, in this view: it's wrong to have sex before marriage and wrong to have children out of wedlock. It's time to stop encouraging sex among schoolchildren with how-to courses and condom distribution programs, according to Choice Three. Promiscuity greatly harms teenagers and society, and schools must help by teaching the value of sexual abstinence before marriage.

Kids Need a Cleaner Culture

It's terribly hard for families and schools to teach morality when popular music, movies, and TV immerse children in immorality, in this view. And the truly deviant behaviors that aren't shown in movies or TV are, for computer-literate children, just a click or two away on the Internet.

Television alone presents the average teenager with 14,000 sexual references or innuendos per year. And by age 18, the average adolescent has witnessed 200,000 acts of TV violence, nearly all presented as normal responses to conflict. Except for broadcasters, hardly anyone still argues that this has no impact on children. More than 1,000 studies, including a Surgeon General's report back in 1972, find a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in children. Just one example:

In October 1993, a 5-year-old boy in Ohio copied a scene from MTV's "Beavis and Butt-head" cable cartoon show: the child set fire to his family's mobile home, but unlike the cartoon home, the boy's home burned to the ground, killing his younger sister.

Cleaning up TV won't be easy, but it's doable. First, parents need more control over what comes into their homes – they will need a better system for rating the content of TV programs than the one introduced in early 1997. Technology can also help. The V-Chip has been mandated by law and will soon permit parents to block selected TV programs; a similar technology should be adapted and mandated for the Internet. Second, government should stop TV broadcasters from filling children's programs with sex and violence and should require broadcasters to set aside an hour a day for family programming.

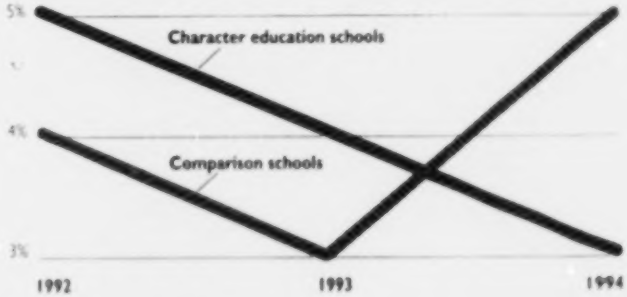
In order to meet Wal-Mart's family standards, compact disc producers had to cover up the model on the cover of White Zombie's CD.

Cleaning up pop culture won't be easy, either, but much can be done, in this view. Pop culture, after all, is a for-profit enterprise, subject to economic pressure. Consider one success story: "Wal-Mart's CD Standards Are Changing Pop Music," the front-page headline in *The New York Times* stated in November 1996. At the insistence of the chain store, which is the nation's single largest retailer of compact discs, music producers are editing CDs to remove obscenities and language that glorifies illegal drugs, violence, and sex. And, rather than making two versions of their products, many companies are simply applying Wal-Mart's family standards to all their music and video products in national distribution.

If one retailer can have such a big impact on the music and video business, say Choice Three supporters, making the culture safe for children is a dream within reach.

Moral Lessons Help Kids Stay Out of Trouble

Percentage of students in schools with a character education curriculum who used marijuana, percentage of students in other schools who used marijuana, 1992, 1994



Source: Developmental Studies Center

In Support

✓ **A moral revival is needed because our permissive society encourages children to test the waters of trouble.**

✓ **Morality is not programmed in our genes; moral behavior must be taught. Failure to instill morals in children jeopardizes them and society.**

✓ **Research provides strong evidence that children do better in school and in life if they are raised in authoritative homes, rather than in indulgent or autocratic homes.**

✓ **One original mission of American public schools was to promote core virtues. We must revive and celebrate that mission. By teaching moral lessons – such as "having a baby out of wedlock is wrong" – schools can help prevent problems.**

✓ **Parents and schools have a harder time raising moral children when popular culture immerses them in immorality.**

✓ **Because the pop culture is so saturated with violence, researchers say, children come to see violence as a normal way to resolve conflict. They also become desensitized to the plight of victims. The entertainment media's obsession with casual sex also beckons young people toward early sexual activity.**

✓ **TV uses publicly owned airwaves, and Americans should be able to stop harmful children's programming.**

✓ **The competitive forces of the marketplace have failed to clean up popular culture for children, so more dramatic steps, including boycotts and regulations, must be taken.**

In Opposition

✗ **In focusing on the moral issue, this choice provides a simplistic view of the youth problem, which is associated with deep social ills including poverty and substance abuse.**

✗ **Trying to improve children's moral education is laudable, but that won't provide them with caring communities beyond the school, or adequate daycare, healthcare, or nutrition.**

✗ **This choice asserts that parents are not teaching their children morals, but the real problem is that many working parents don't have enough time to provide children with the supervision and care they need.**

✗ **This choice would have schools impose one set of moral values on everyone, even though schools stopped teaching values because there was so much disagreement about whose values should be taught.**

✗ **Blaming the entertainment media for corrupting youth is no more valid today than it was in the 1950s, when Congress held hearings about whether comic books caused juvenile delinquency and deviant sexuality.**

✗ **This choice calls for censoring the media if it won't censor itself, but government censorship goes against everything democracy stands for.**

✗ **There is no need for more regulation of TV programming or advertising when all a parent has to do is turn the TV set off. Research indicates that 3 in 5 parents do not restrict what their children watch on TV.**

For Further Reading/Give Children Moral Discipline

- Robert H. Bork, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996).
- Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
- Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

Back to North Babylon

The North Babylon scavenger hunt described in the introduction is the kind of event that makes people very uneasy about kids today. How was it that a bunch of "untroubled" teenagers went out on an Easter eve rampage, sawing off traffic signs, stealing pay phones, looking to buy marijuana and "kidnap" younger children? Supporters of the three choices in this book have very different perspectives on the incident and reach very different conclusions about what should be done:

Choice One supporters say the situation in North Babylon illustrates what can happen when parents don't spend enough time with their children – consciously or unconsciously putting personal ambition and self-satisfaction ahead of child rearing. Why were these children, some in their early teens, out on the street at midnight with no adult supervision? Where were their parents?

Choice One supporters say that, for the benefit of children and society, we must reverse economic and social trends that deprive children of their parents' time. In this view, parents must make career and lifestyle sacrifices to spend more time with their children, and society should steer parents in the right direction with appropriate rewards and penalties – such as tax relief for stay-at-home parents and jail time for noncustodial parents who abandon children.

Nicolas Ascio

Choice Two supporters say the North Babylon story features a common plot: society treats children like unwanted guests, and kids respond in predictable, immature ways. When police arrested and questioned the 16 teenagers, they all told police they got involved for lack of anything else to do. Police officer John Carey was sympathetic and told *The New York Times*, "These kids *are* at a loss for things to do." Choice Two says it's easy, but incorrect, to blame parents, as Choice One does.

Instead, Choice Two calls for Americans to take collective responsibility for meeting children's basic needs, much as we do for older Americans by providing them with Social Security pensions and Medicare health benefits. We need to provide children with the basics, including caring communities and high-quality education, recreation, healthcare, and daycare.

Choice Three supporters say the North Babylon theft-a-thon demonstrates the failure of parents and schools to teach moral behavior – leaving the immoral pop culture to fill the vacuum. One of the young thieves, who plays in a heavy-metal band called Punishment and Aggression, summed up his lack of moral education in two sentences: *"Maybe we did some things we shouldn't have ... It wasn't that bad that we should have gotten arrested."*

Choice Three supporters say the youth problem doesn't stem from a shortage of either parental attention or children's services, as suggested by prior choices. In this view, it's a moral problem demanding moral solutions. Using every possible means, from education to regulation, society must prod parents, schools, and the entertainment media to do what's best for children: set and enforce rules, teach moral absolutes such as "sex before marriage is wrong," and provide a wholesome corner in the culture for raising children.

Can elements of the choices be combined? Readers may find appealing strategies in each choice and be tempted to create their own combination. The choices are not mutually exclusive. But each views the youth problem from a very different perspective and each leads the nation in a very different direction. Mixing some elements of the choices carries a risk of sending public policy in circles, and wasting scarce resources. The civic challenge is to make a prudent choice, and that means carefully considering and accepting its costs and benefits.

Comparing the Choices

Research suggests that most American children and adolescents engage in little or no risky behavior. But something's wrong with the way we're raising children when so many of them experiment with illegal drugs, cheat at school, and are disrespectful to adults. Plus, an estimated 1 in 4 adolescents is in serious trouble with school, drugs, or crime. What can we do to help raise good kids? This is an issue with many moral, economic, and cultural dimensions. To promote comparison of the choices presented in this issue book, a summary is presented on these pages.

Choice 1

Put Children Ahead of Self-Satisfaction

- Kids are troubled because many grow up in daycare and empty homes. Parents, preferably married, must spend more time with their children, and society must guide parents with rewards and punishments.

What Can Be Done?

- Raise the minimum wage and increase tax benefits for families to help parents stay home with small children and spend more time with older children.
- Eliminate public funding for daycare programs, which are not healthy for small children.
- Expand programs that promote responsible fatherhood and penalize deadbeat parents.

In Support

- Research and common sense indicate there is no substitute for parental care.
- Most juvenile crime and sex occur during after-school hours when parents are absent.
- Children need two involved parents for emotional and financial support.

In Opposition

- Staying home with children is impossible for most families, which struggle to get by on two incomes.
- This choice does not address children's basic needs for education, healthcare, or caring communities.
- The problem is not a shortage of parental time; it's a shortage of moral guidance for children.

A Likely Tradeoff

- In calling for a stay-at-home parent, this choice would have the biggest impact on women and would undermine their progress toward equality.

Choice 2

Share Responsibility for Children

- Our children are in trouble because society treats them like second-class citizens. To thrive, children need to grow up in caring communities and receive essential services.

What Can Be Done?

- Make a collective commitment to meet children's needs, akin to our commitment to older Americans.
- Provide all children with high-quality education, healthcare, and daycare; reduce poverty by, among other things, providing public works jobs to parents.
- Give aid to communities for creating caring environments for children.

In Support

- Children are the most underserved population in America.
- Society has a responsibility to help children because society benefits when they become productive adults.
- Poverty increases the risks for all youth problems, so antipoverty strategies are needed to help children.

In Opposition

- This choice would be prohibitively expensive.
- What children need first and foremost is more care and attention from their parents. With limited resources, society should concentrate on helping parents spend more time with their children.
- This choice ignores the moral reasons for youth misbehavior.

A Likely Tradeoff

- In calling for significant investments in children's services, this choice would force higher taxes or reductions in other programs, or both.

Choice 3

Give Children Moral Discipline

- Without rules, children are unruly. Permissive parents and schools, and a decadent pop culture, are leading kids astray. Children need firm guidance, early and often, about moral behavior and consequences for misbehavior.

What Can Be Done?

- Educate parents: kids are natural explorers who need protective boundaries in the form of rules and consequences.
- Let schools reassert their moral authority; teach children moral principles such as: sex before marriage is wrong.
- Stop the entertainment media from bombarding children with sex and violence. Use regulations, if needed.

In Support

- A moral revival is needed because our permissive society leads children and adolescents astray.
- Research indicates that children thrive when parents and schools enforce firm boundaries for behavior.
- It's difficult to raise moral children when the popular culture immerses them in immorality.

In Opposition

- By focusing only on moral issues, this choice fails to address children's basic needs – for better schools, healthcare, and daycare.

- This choice would have schools impose one set of values on everyone.
- There is no need to regulate TV programming when all parents have to do is turn the set off.

A Likely Tradeoff

- In calling for restraints on popular culture to protect children, this choice would restrict the right to free expression.

What Are the National Issues Forums?

National Issues Forums bring together citizens around the nation to discuss challenging social and political issues of the day. They have addressed issues such as the economy, education, healthcare, foreign affairs, poverty, and crime.

Thousands of civic, service, and religious organizations, as well as libraries, high schools, and colleges, have sponsored forums. The sponsoring organizations select topics from among each year's most pressing public concerns, then design and coordinate their own forum programs, which are held through the fall, winter, and spring.

How to start a forum

Forums are initiated at the local level by civic and educational organizations. For information about starting a forum and using our materials, write the NIF Institute, P.O. Box 75306, Washington, D.C. 20013-5306, or phone 800-433-7834.

A different kind of discussion

No two forums are alike. They range from small study circles to large gatherings modeled after town meetings, but all are different from everyday conversations and adversarial debates.

Since forums seek to increase understanding of complicated issues, participants need not start out with detailed knowledge of an issue. Forum organizers distribute issue books such as this one, featuring a nonpartisan overview of an issue and a choice of several public responses. By presenting each issue in a nonpartisan way, forums encourage participants to take a fresh look at the issues and at their own convictions.

In the forums, participants share their opinions, their concerns, and their knowledge. With the help of moderators and the issue books, participants weigh several possible ways for society to address a problem. They analyze each choice, the arguments for and against it, and the tradeoffs and other implications of the choice. Moderators encourage participants, as they gravitate to one option or another, to examine their basic values as individuals and as community members.

The common ground

Forums enrich participants' thinking on public issues. Participants confront each issue head-on, make an informed decision about how to address it, and come to terms with the likely consequences of their choices. In this deliberative process, participants often accept choices that are not entirely consistent with their individual wishes and that impose costs they had not initially considered. This happens because the forum process helps people see issues from different points of view; participants use discussion to discover, not persuade or advocate. The best deliberative forums can help participants move toward shared, stable, well-informed public judgments about important issues.

Participants may hold sharply different opinions and beliefs, but in the forums they discuss their attitudes, concerns, and convictions about each issue and, as a group, seek to resolve their conflicting priorities and principles. In this way, participants move from making individual choices to making choices as members of a community – the kind of choices from which public action may result.

Building community through public deliberation

In a democracy, citizens must come together to find answers they can all live with – while acknowledging that individuals have differing opinions. Forums help people find the areas where their interests and goals overlap. This allows a public voice to emerge that can give direction to public policy.

The forums are nonpartisan and do not advocate a particular solution to any public issue, nor should they be confused with referenda or public opinion polls. Rather, the forums enable diverse groups of Americans to determine together what direction they want policy to take, what kinds of action and legislation they favor, and what, for their common good, they oppose.

From agreement to action

Forums can lead to several kinds of public action. Generally, a public voice emerges in the results of the forums, and that helps set the government's compass, since forum results are shared with elected officials each year. Also, as a result of attending forums, individuals and groups may decide to take action individually or in association with others to help remedy a public problem, taking actions that citizens can take outside of government.

Our Nation's Kids

Is Something Wrong?

One of the reasons people participate in the National Issues Forums is that they want leaders to know how they feel about the issues. So that we can present your thoughts and feelings about the issue, we'd like you to fill out this ballot before you attend forum meetings (or before you read this book, if you buy it elsewhere), and to fill out a second ballot after the forum (or after you've read the material). Before answering any of the questions, make up a three-digit number and write it in the box below.

The moderator of your local forum will ask you to hand in this ballot at the end of the session. If you are not attending a forum, send the completed ballot to the National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

☐ **Fill in your three-digit number here.**

1. Here is a list of principles on which policies toward children might be based. How important do you think each one is?

	Very important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	Not sure
a. Reduce violence and sex in the entertainment media.	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Strictly enforce laws that require absent fathers to pay child support.	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Improve and expand daycare centers.	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Encourage one parent to stay at home to raise children, especially during the first few years.	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Teach children the difference between right and wrong at school as well as at home.	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Ensure that all children are covered by health insurance.	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Look at the list in Question #1 again. How strongly is each principle reflected in current policy?

	Strongly	Somewhat strongly	Not at all	Not sure
a. Reduce violence and sex in the entertainment media.	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. Strictly enforce laws that require absent fathers to pay child support.	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Improve and expand daycare centers.	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Encourage one parent to stay at home to raise children, especially during the first few years.	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Teach children the difference between right and wrong at school as well as at home.	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Ensure that all children are covered by health insurance.	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Are there other principles that you think should guide our policies about children? Please explain.

4. How concerned are you about the following?

	Very concerned	Somewhat concerned	Not at all concerned	Not sure
a. That government programs are expected to do the family's job.	☐	☐	☐	☐
b. That in today's economy, both parents must work.	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Parents who place self-satisfaction before their children's well-being.	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Children growing up without moral standards.	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. The increase in crime committed by juveniles.	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. The effect of TV shows, movies, and pop songs on children's values.	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. Do you have any other concerns about this issue? Please explain.

6. How do you feel about these approaches to the problem?

	Favor	Oppose	Not sure
a. Parents should put their children's needs first, EVEN IF this means one parent has to give up a career to stay at home.	☐	☐	☐
b. We should spend as much on children as we do on the elderly, EVEN IF this means raising taxes to pay for better health, education, and recreation programs.	☐	☐	☐
c. We should do what we can to clean up the media, EVEN IF this risks limiting our rights to free speech.	☐	☐	☐

7. Which statement best describes how you feel? (Please choose only one answer.)
   - ☐ a. I am not at all certain about what is needed to help kids.
   - ☐ b. I have a general idea of what is needed.
   - ☐ c. I have a clear, definite view of what is needed.

8. Are you male or female? ☐ Male ☐ Female

9. How much schooling have you completed?
   ☐ Less than 6th grade ☐ 6th-8th grade ☐ Some high school ☐ High school graduate
   ☐ Some college ☐ College graduate ☐ Graduate school

10. Are you:
    ☐ White ☐ African-American ☐ Hispanic ☐ Asian-American ☐ Other (specify)

11. Are you a parent? ☐ Yes ☐ No

12. How old are you?
    ☐ 17 or younger ☐ 18-29 ☐ 30-49 ☐ 50-64 ☐ 65 or older

13. Have you attended an NIF forum before? ☐ Yes ☐ No

14. If you answered "yes" to #12, how many forums have you attended? ☐ 1-3 ☐ 4 or more

15. Do you live in the:
    ☐ Northeast ☐ South ☐ Midwest ☐ West
    ☐ Southwest ☐ Other

16. What is your zip code? _____

Our Nation's Kids

Is Something Wrong?

Now that you've had a chance to read the book or attend a forum discussion, we'd like to know what you think about this issue. Your opinions, along with those of thousands of others who participated in this year's forums, will be reflected in a summary report prepared for participants as well as elected officials and policymakers working on this problem. Since we're interested in whether you have changed your mind about certain aspects of this issue, the questions are the same as those you answered earlier. Before answering the questions, please write in the box below the same three-digit number you used for the Pre-Forum Ballot.

Please hand this ballot to the forum leader at the end of the session, or mail it to: the National Issues Forums, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777.

Fill in your three-digit number here.

1. Here is a list of principles on which policies toward children might be based. How important do you think each one is?	Very important	Somewhat important	Not at all important	Not sure
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b. Strictly enforce laws that require absent fathers to pay child support.	☐	☐	☐	☐
c. Improve and expand daycare centers.	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Encourage one parent to stay at home to raise children, especially during the first few years.	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Teach children the difference between right and wrong at school as well as at home.	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Ensure that all children are covered by health insurance.	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Look at the list in Question #1 again. How strongly is each principle reflected in current policy?	Strongly	Somewhat strongly	Not at all	Not sure
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c. Improve and expand daycare centers.	☐	☐	☐	☐
d. Encourage one parent to stay at home to raise children, especially during the first few years.	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. Teach children the difference between right and wrong at school as well as at home.	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. Ensure that all children are covered by health insurance.	☐	☐	☐	☐

3. Are there other principles that you think should guide our policies about children? Please explain.

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a. That government programs are expected to do the family's job.	☐	☐	☐	☐
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d. Children growing up without moral standards.	☐	☐	☐	☐
e. The increase in crime committed by juveniles.	☐	☐	☐	☐
f. The effect of TV shows, movies, and pop songs on children's values.	☐	☐	☐	☐

5. Do you have any other concerns about this issue? Please explain.

6. How do you feel about these approaches to the problem?

	Favor	Oppose	Not sure
a. Parents should put their children's needs first, EVEN IF this means one parent has to give up a career to stay at home.	☐	☐	☐
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c. We should do what we can to clean up the media, EVEN IF this risks limiting our rights to free speech.	☐	☐	☐

7. Which statement best describes how you feel? (Please choose only one answer.)
   - a. I am not at all certain about what is needed to help kids. ☐
   - b. I have a general idea of what is needed. ☐
   - c. I have a clear, definite view of what is needed. ☐

8. Are there any other comments you would like to make about U.S. policies affecting children?

9. What is your zip code? _____

For the National Issues Forums

Public Agenda

Kettering Foundation

Additional Copies

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